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## TOLSTOY: HIS TEACHING, AND INFLUENCE IN ENGLAND.

By JOHN C. KENWORTHY.

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It seems to me that at the present time there is not living a more commanding personality and profounder spiritual influence than Leo Tolstoy, the Russian. His writings appear in every language; and just because he has wholly stripped himself of rank, fortune and power, from the possession of which the fame of most men arises, he, of all men, has come to be valued the more purely for what he in himself is, and says, and does. In claiming for him this high position, I make due allowance for the fact that most people know of him only to misunderstand him, and that by many he is supposed to be an enemy of true morality and social order. On the other hand, there is an increasing number of people who profess to find in his teaching, inspiration and guidance of the truest kind.

These opponents and these adherents of Tolstoy, are, perhaps, more numerous in England than in any country outside Russia. As examples of their respective views, I may cite, on the one hand, that gentleman who recently wrote of Tolstoy as a worn-out libertine, who had made of the dregs of his old age a hypocritical offering to religion,—a description which *The Christian World* applauded as “fearless and outspoken;” and on the other hand, a well-known woman writer, who, in a recent private letter, refers to Tolstoy as “that great master who has brought so much peace and security into my soul, as into the souls of so many.”

Nothing is further from any purpose I have, than the establishment of a Tolstoy *cult*. But, as every honest student of Tolstoy must do, I recognise a high and welcome duty in the task of promoting the truer understanding of a man about whom such conflicting estimates are afloat. If the prejudice created by such people as the writer quoted above, whom *The Christian World* praises, and the publishers who, to push its sale, put *The Kreutzer Sonata* before the public as an immoral book, were once broken through, there are in this country, I am sure, multitudes of earnest souls, now fearful to venture upon Tolstoy, who would read, and find in his pages the spiritual food and instruction they most need and desire.

Since the great change which came over the life and work of Tolstoy, eighteen or twenty years ago, a corresponding change has come over the world's attitude towards him. Whereas he was before applauded by the literate and the learned, he is now mainly pitied and opposed by these classes; and whereas he was formerly estranged from "the common people," it is now for their sakes that he labours and writes, and it is among them that his spirit is best understood. This is clearly manifest, I understand, in his own country, and certainly begins to come in evidence here in England. The reason is, that Tolstoy is one of those rare minds who take all life for their province; and the high specialisation of the scholars and the scientists precisely unfits them to follow him in that simple and broad appreciation of the facts of life which is more easily attained by the less sophisticated peasant and labourer.

We who have not seen him, have learned to picture Tolstoy as a broad, strong man, still robust under his now sixty-seven years. In his portraits, we have been shown a strong face with irregular features, and mass of long hair and long beard. Every visitor from him tells us of his peasant-

dress, his extreme simplicity of life, and his efforts to make himself "worth his keep" by ploughing fields, making shoes, or carrying the domestic water-supply. Curiosity as to such personal details is rife about every noted man; but in Tolstoy's case, the curiosity is of double intensity, for his teaching is wholly concentrated upon the conduct of life, upon how men ought to live. His peculiar power and influence as a teacher, arise from the fact that he has harmonised his conduct with his belief. The curious world has found a man who practises what he preaches, and has therefore taken him seriously, as it does not every theorist in morals, philosophy, and religion.

In considering the highly aristocratic ancestry of Tolstoy, I am most struck by the fact of his descent, at several removes, from St. Michael, Prince of Montenegro, whom he is said to much resemble in feature. I cannot help laying the same stress on this circumstance, as we in England lay upon the Scotch ancestry of Ruskin and Carlyle. The spirit of freedom, and great souls, are of the mountain, not of the plain.

I have frequently heard our labouring men object to the notion that Tolstoy, in his renunciations, has made any great sacrifice; "Ah, yes," they say, "but he is always sure of his living." Though it be true that no danger of death by starvation lay at the bottom of Tolstoy's social descent, still this rich, noble, and famous author's so complete surrender of position and property must have been accompanied by efforts and pains, in some proportion to the height at which he stood above "the common people." Lifelong habits and prejudices were to be surrendered; the supposed interests of his family pressed upon him; the opposition, wonder, and even scorn of his circle were to be faced. The whole process of the relinquishment of his estates and of his property down to the property in his writings, and the

adoption of a simple and laborious life, has proved sufficiently dramatic and startling to men's minds; and it is perfectly true that Tolstoy's example behind them has been even more powerful than his writings themselves. A deep interest must necessarily attach to the life in which this striking passage occurs.

The dominant characteristics of Tolstoy's mind are largeness and sincerity. We must imagine him as a boy,—the Ivan Irteneff of *Childhood, Boyhood, and Youth*,\*—observant, sensitive, lively, shy, and vigorous; accustomed mainly to life in and about the great country-house of a Russian noble family; there becoming familiar with the simple Russian peasant-folk, and with deepest love absorbing the spirit of nature from field, forest, sky, and the earth-life about him. Presently, he is taken to Moscow, grows into the life of the town, passes through the University. Leaving there, he joins the army, and by-and-bye is a man among men. The earlier passages of this life, up to the University period, are pictured in the story of Ivan Irteneff with that largeness and sincerity of which I have spoken.

The years spent in the army, in the Caucasus, and in the Crimea, and the years of his first literary effort, are to be noted for the fact that, on his own confession, Tolstoy followed the way of the world. "Lying, robbery, adultery of all kinds, drunkenness, violence and murder, all committed by me, not one crime omitted," is his description of the life into which he was led, and held for ten years, clearly against his better nature, by the whole force of the society around him. Upon this passage, those calumniators have seized who would present Tolstoy's later religion as that of a worn-out sinner. They overlook the sentence, actually part of the passage I have just quoted, in which he says, "and yet

\* "Boyhood; a Story." Published by the Brotherhood Publishing Company, Croydon.



I was not the less considered by my equals a comparatively moral man." There is abundant evidence to show that during these years of boyhood and early manhood, notwithstanding the conduct into which fashion, inexperience and youth betrayed him, the Gospel ideas were penetrating his mind; unconsciously for the most part, perhaps, but surely. Even in the stories written during this evil period, there is a superior sense of honour, as in *The Two Hussars*,\* and an acute sympathy with the oppressed, as in *Lucerne*.\* All these earlier writings bear the clear promise of Tolstoy's later developments.

Nor do those peculiarly English critics of Tolstoy draw attention to the fact that, in the midst of the success of his earlier writings (*War and Peace*, that "realistic" story which is, they say, like life itself, belongs to this period), he married in happy fashion, when thirty-four years of age; withdrew to his inherited estate, and there set himself earnestly to the fulfilment of the duties, as he then conceived them, of a landed proprietor. The story of Levine in *Anna Karénina*, is the story of Tolstoy himself, and shows how strongly the sense of duty urged him to the care of his estates and of those upon them. The government of his labourers, the improvement of cultivation and crops, the establishment of schools, social and economic experiments and labours of many kinds, —these, with his literary pursuits, filled in a life of what is called "philanthropy." Space forbids that I should say what many critics have already said of the writings belonging to this, Tolstoy's mid-period. But it has not yet been remarked, so far as I know, that all these works have the general character of being deliberate and unbiassed *studies in life*, executed with the insight and breadth of genius. They record the observations from which the conclusions of

\* See the volume entitled, "A Russian Proprietor," published by Walter Scott, Limited, London.

*What shall we do then?*\* *What I believe*,† and *The Kingdom of God is Within You*,\* are derived. For the mind of Tolstoy is eminently “scientific,” truly methodical in its operation, while artistic in expression.

He was famous, rich, successful, happy in his family, and at fifty years of age found himself so miserable that he had to avoid temptations to suicide. Why? The cause and the solution are made fully plain in *My Confession*\* and *What shall we do then?* A spiritual crisis came upon him, such as appears to come upon every man whom God destines for a saviour of souls. A sense of the nothingness of his life, of his unfitness, overwhelmed him. The sum of his experiences and his varied knowledges were cast into doubt, and the one question pressed irresistibly and incessantly upon him, What does it all mean? What is the end of life? Quite clearly, the cause of this crisis in Tolstoy’s soul was a profound sense of the wrongness of his relations, as a rich man, with the poor and labouring part of humanity. It was in the righting of those relations that he “found peace.”

The discovery he made, so convincingly set forth in *My Confession*, is, that mankind is the creation of a God who is Love, and that love and service to one another are the only relations in which men can exist happily. A doctrine this, incessantly preached in all churches called Christian, but never there carried to the logical conclusion found by Tolstoy. He, in short, has faithfully returned to the principles of conduct taught by Jesus Christ. His great work, *The Four Gospels Harmonised and Translated*† (part I. of which has just lately appeared in this country), is the evidence of the energy and thoroughness with which he has

\* Walter Scott, Limited, London.

† The Brotherhood Publishing Company, Croydon.



swept aside all dogmas, creeds and conventionalities, in the supreme desire to recover the teaching of Jesus. Anyone who desires "the latest thing" in scholarship will be disappointed in this book; but anyone who is concerned to know just what Jesus and His teaching stand for to-day in the estimation of a man of proved genius and goodness, will find in this book what he seeks.

With that largeness which we have noted, Tolstoy works out the new truth in every direction. In *What shall we do then?* he describes the process by which he applied the Christian ethic to economics, and practically to his own life. He discovers, by experiment, the failure of so-called "charity" (that is, almsgiving as ordinarily practised), to relieve distress. By a searching and unique analysis of the nature and use of money, he discovers in it the instrument of monopoly, the power by which the possessors of it command the labour of others; and he concludes that the only serviceable way in which he can serve the labouring poor, is, not by making presents to them of money or goods to which he has no moral right, but by *working to keep himself*; so relieving others of the burden of keeping him.

From this standpoint, he proceeds to pass in review the general arguments in support of the existing order of society, advanced by those who are interested in its maintenance. He enquires, What services do governments, armies, ministers of religion, scientists, artists, even organisers of business and trade, render to the people at large, seeing that, in return for their labours, they take nearly everything, only leaving to the people the barest subsistence, which would be quite obtainable by the people without the aid of these classes? And he asks, Are not their power and luxury harmful even to the classes themselves, seeing that a fair examination of their lives shows

them to be enervated, perverted, and hardened, as a result of their false relations to the mass of people? To the consideration of these questions and their answers, Tolstoy brings an amazing sweep of knowledge. He speaks and writes, well knowing what has been said and done before him; his appeal is to no fashion of thought, to no sect, but to mankind; he draws upon nature, philosophy, and history at large for his material. And this, never in an academic way, but with a direct and vital appreciation. He goes to the heart of the matter. His understanding of the speech and ideas of other countries and other times is not so much dependent on dictionaries, but is illuminated by a profound insight into the heart and thought of man. The sum of all his discussion is (the passage is quoted from *What I Believe*):

“I believe that true happiness will only be possible when all men begin to follow Christ’s doctrine.

“I believe that the fulfilment of this doctrine is easy, possible, and conducive to happiness.

“I believe that, even if it be left unfulfilled by all around me, if I have to stand alone among men, I cannot do otherwise than follow it, in order to save my own life from inevitable destruction.”

The significance of these declarations turns wholly upon the question, What is Christ’s doctrine? It is in answering this that Tolstoy’s singularity becomes manifest.

He has cast aside every creed of every church; he has refused credence to every point of theology and every story of miracle which he could not verify for himself from the facts and experience of life. By this method, he has practically identified Christianity with the philosophy, the metaphysic, of John’s Gospel, and the rules for conduct of life contained in the Sermon on the Mount. The key to his position is the doctrine that men must act in accordance with their beliefs; that it is worse than useless to believe a truth and not to do it. If then, he says, the society round about you is following evil principles, it is your duty, who

know the right principles, to follow the right in your own lives. This leads him to the enunciation (in *What I Believe*) of five points of conduct necessary for immediate and strict observance by each individual, namely—(1) Entire avoidance of anger. (2) Purity of heart and life in the sex relation. (3) Avoidance of oaths and pledges. (4) Evil is not to be resisted by violence. (5) Equal love to all men, even to foreigners and enemies. ✓ Shelley

A brief examination will show that these five points are simply a re-statement of principles from the Sermon on the Mount. But how vast a gulf they have opened between Tolstoy, and both the upholders and the enemies of our present social system! On the one hand, orthodoxy and conservatism reject his standard as an impracticable and impossible one; they accuse him of wresting all authorities to support a far-fetched and fanatical doctrine of human life and society. On the other hand, the extremists who wholly agree with Tolstoy's criticism of society as it is, protest vehemently against the doctrine of non-resistance to evil by violence. "By this rule," they say to him, "you would make men a prey to every oppressor; you are but renewing the forces of ecclesiasticism, which persuades the poor and the enslaved to tolerate present conditions for the sake of a heaven which is to come." ✓

To both of these oppositions Tolstoy replies in effect, "I have simply recovered the plain and unmistakeable teaching of Jesus. And the heart of the teaching of Jesus is this very rejected and despised doctrine, which says that the methods of self-defence and violent resistance can never establish justice among men; self-surrender, truth, and perfect love to all, being the only powers which can bring about this end. Our Creator, our God, is love; love leads to equality of service among men, for all men are brethren, and equals before their Father; such ✓

a life of love is peace and satisfaction ; and all these things I have proved and know by actual experience, which you also may do, if you will."

Such teaching as this is, after all, not singular in our, or in any, age, and it is not impossible to find others to-day who, like Tolstoy, have harmonised their lives with such belief. But rarely indeed in history do teaching and example, as in Tolstoy's case, receive advertisement in the person of one man, a world-genius. Tolstoy's standing and fame have made him a rallying-point for like spirits everywhere. At the time of the great famine in Russia, four years since, people all the world over turned to him as the instrument of their benevolence ; and we are told how twenty thousand lives were saved through his direct agency, and further twenty thousand indirectly through him. At that very time priests were preaching against him as "Anti-Christ," and telling the starving people that his bread would poison them.

A word must here be said about those later short stories in which Tolstoy has sought to simply and dramatically convey the truth of life to "the people." Upon reading such tales as *Where Love is, there God is also* ;\* *What Men live by* ;\* and *Master and Man*,\* one is not surprised to hear that their circulation in Russia goes by tens of thousands, somewhat as "the penny dreadful" does with us. In one at least of those stories, *The Godson*,\* there are rarely-sounded depths of spiritual experience and truth put into parable in a way for which I know not where to find a parallel. In *Work While ye Have the Light*,† the Christian life in its relation to the great social problems of property, government, labour, the sexes, the family, art—in short,

\* Walter Scott, Limited, London.

† The Brotherhood Publishing Company, Croydon.

to conduct generally,—is pictured and discussed under the form of a story of early Christian times.

The writer who most resembles Tolstoy in his general attitude of mind, great range of feeling, thought, and knowledge, and in his intense vitality, is our English Ruskin. In distinguishing the two, one would, I think, ascribe to Ruskin, fineness; to Tolstoy, robustness. But their general harmony is complete; both are world-prophets. If we concede a greater power to Tolstoy, it is because he has gone the further in practice, in example. Ruskin sought for the heart of the people; he is finding it through the medium of others, the people of culture whom he has taught. Tolstoy also seeks for the heart of the people; and he is finding it more directly.

In all this, I would not think disproportionately of Tolstoy's place and work in the world. Righteousness is, as yet, only a little leaven, working through the ignorance, selfishness and apathy of the vast human mass. In now treating of Tolstoy's influence in England, we must remember that our subject occupies only a small place in outward public regard, and becomes of high importance only to those who know that spiritual life in individuals and nations is the true and only life. The sap and its flow are among the least evident of the tree's parts and functions; yet they are the life of the tree.

England is known as peculiarly the country of the Bible. Since we became a nation, all our great national reform movements have been inspired from that literature of the Hebrews. The religious and social movement of Wickliff's time, and Puritanism, Quakerism, Nonconformity, Wesleyanism, Salvationism, are links in the chain of proof that the heart of our people has always concerned itself with the Bible as a repository of truth. So that Tolstoy's reversion to "the Christianity of Christ" has a peculiar force of



appeal in England. It may, perhaps, be said, that men of our nation, of all others, have most and best witnessed for the extreme truths which Tolstoy now declares. Our Quakerism has founded itself upon the doctrine of non-resistance. Regeneration, the new birth, upon which Tolstoy so much insists, and his experience of which he tells in *My Confession*, has been, and feebly still is, the cardinal doctrine of our Evangelicalism. Our Puritan morality represents a national effort after the Gospel purity of life. Comparative freedom of speech and of person are ours in England, because we have in some dim way, and more than other nations, felt the principle of liberty that lives in the teaching of Jesus. Not that our national wrong-doing is less, but perhaps greater than that of other peoples. We are probably the nearest of all nations to the crisis and destruction that waits the world's "civilisation," because our concessions to freedom have given our national life a more rapid movement. And what hope of national regeneration there is for us, lies, I am convinced, in such solid and simple convictions as to the truth of life, which may have become part of our popular instinct, as the result of centuries of familiarity with, and use of, the Old and New Testaments. Above all things, I am sure that he does best work among us who best learns for himself, and most helps others to understand, the true meaning of that great life of Jesus, the Christ-life.

To such sentiment in our midst, Tolstoy, speaking out of the heart of the simple and kindly Russian peasant-people, a people formed, like ourselves, under the Christian tradition, appeals most movingly. His books are English books, for they are human and Christly. To-day, his social and religious works are in the hands of thousands of our people, largely those of that lower middle-class who have so much reason to desire a social change, and whose lives afford them



some means of information and some liberty of thought. I hold, from personal knowledge, that in the minds which provide what religion England has, Tolstoy touches the same springs that were reached by Wicklif, Fox, Bunyan, and Wesley. His more obvious work is done in Russia, but his inspiration is working here, and will work. The so-called "Christian" Churches and Sects, here as everywhere, are lost to vital Christianity; they are, at their best, more concerned with the maintenance of their own organizations than with the spread of the Christ-life; therefore the earnest Christian souls more and more look outside them for the realisation of their Christianity. And so looking, they see Tolstoy, who is teaching and *living* the Christ-life, to whom they listen, and from whom they learn. Through mists of calumny and misunderstanding, the light of his message is clearing its way, and directly or subtly, in purity or alloy, through him, revived truth is largely entering minds and lives of men. How far the influence of Tolstoy in England will hereafter be identifiable in history, one cannot guess; but his work will be done, and it will not be small in God's reckoning.

In seeking "the Kingdom of Heaven" of Jesus, Tolstoy, of course, contemplates the entire supplanting of the existing social system by a better, the ideal, one. But his methods for bringing this about are, how different from those of the revolutionaries! I have in my mind at this moment, a man who has made great sacrifices and performed vast labours for English Socialism. Through it all, he earns his living by what he himself clearly exposes as the most nefarious of social practices upon the Stock Exchange. To the audiences he addresses, he says, "Your system allows this, indeed compels me to it; and while you enable me to thus live in comfort by cheating you, I shall do it. But when you consent to change the system, then no one will be more pleased than I to become honest."

As compared with this, Tolstoy would say, "I perceive that men are miserable in society because they will not be honest and brotherly one to another. I see that any change can only come by men changing their conduct. Quite clearly, I must myself therefore become honest and loving to all my fellows. I must not consent to live by dishonesty, nor must I do that which I know is injurious both to others and myself."

These two attitudes are those of the Materialist and the Mystic. The former recognises nothing beyond what is obvious in physical nature, and he therefore says "There is nothing for me more than this earth-life, of which I must make the best for myself. Morality has no higher authority than as being the principles whereby man may obtain most satisfaction during the passage from the cradle to the grave ; therefore I accommodate my morality to my conception of life, to my desires and my surroundings."

But the Mystic says, "I recognise in the material universe around me, the outward manifestation of an indwelling Life. I feel that Life moving, operating in my reason and conscience, persuading me that Truth and Love are the laws of my being, to which I must at all costs conform. For no cause must I infringe those laws. Thus conforming, I find I obtain that happiness which I seek elsewhere, and fail to find. I have learned the secret of life. I am now without fears, and without doubts, assured that my true life does not depend upon material things, and that, whatever Death may mean, it must be something good, and not evil. The only terrible thing is, to live in dishonesty and wrongdoing." And this is the sum of Tolstoy's philosophy.

At the beginning of his book, *Life*,\* Tolstoy quotes this basic thought from Kant :—

"Two things fill my spirit with ever fresh and increasing wonder and awe, the oftener and the more steadfastly my thoughts occupy

\* Walter Scott, Limited, London.

themselves therewith—the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me. . . . The first begins from the place which I occupy in the world of space, and extends the connection in which I stand, to invisible space beyond the eye of man, with worlds on worlds, systems on systems, to their periodical movements in endless time, their beginning and continuance. The second begins with my unseen self, my personality, and places me in a world which has true eternity, but which is perceptible only to the understanding, and with which I am conscious of being, not as in the former case, in accidental, but in universal and indispensable connection.”

For all these reasons of Philosophy and Religion, and in the name of Jesus Christ, one greater than himself, Tolstoy, by precept and example, invites us to renounce all we hold from the world on other terms than those of Truth and Love. If we will not equivocate, that proposal means for us, as for him, the surrender of property held by force of law, and positions of mastership and power; obedience to conscience only; the strict control of our animal appetites; and readiness to suffer for truth’s sake. But if you fear to make this heroic renunciation, says Tolstoy, you can at least “keep from speaking falsely before yourself and others—this you are always able to do, and not only able, but in duty bound to do, because in this alone—in freeing yourself from falsehood, and in working out the truth,—lies the highest duty of your life. And do but this, and it will be sufficient for the situation to change at once of itself.”

For all this, what is offered to us in return? According to Tolstoy, everything for which we have, so far in ignorance and error, longed and striven—all summed up in “satisfaction of life.” Paul calls the same thing “the peace of God, which passes understanding;” the peace to which no mere process of reasoning can lead us.

In his writings, Tolstoy does not record his speculations, but only that which he has, or believes he has, verified. For this reason, I suppose, he makes no clear utterance as to the life hereafter. But those who have understandingly read *Master and Man*, will have noted the significance of the

tale's ending. The dying merchant, who has rescued his last moments from the service of self, and gives his life in restoring life to his despised servant ; he, dying, disappears, as it were, into the infinite of Love. And Nikita, the man, rescued to live another twenty years of simple, toilsome peasant-life, at last passes away in peace, satisfied to be gone. Of him, Tolstoy asks,

“Is he better, or worse off, there, in the place where he awoke after that real death? Is he disappointed? Or has he found things there to be such as he expected?”

And Tolstoy answers only :

“That, we shall all of us soon learn.”

We may conclude, it is not to annihilation at death that Tolstoy looks forward. Rather, one may be sure, having obtained peace by living the truth, he awaits with gladness and without fear, the coming of an end of life that shall be a beginning of life. And it is this, after all, which constitutes the power of the Christian doctrine over the hearts and lives of men, namely, that it is the promise, not only of the life which now is, but of that which is to come.

The chief influence of Tolstoy in every country that has heard the Gospel, springs from his nearness to the truth of life, and thus to Jesus. I have found no fault in him, because he is one of those, who, by their lives, disarm our criticism and demand our love.

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